

Dr. Ed Rogers Video Nugget Transcription – PaL Session June 15, 2006 @ GSFC

What is a the PaL Process?

Part A Start time: 1:23 End time: 1:37

I'm here to talk about the process called Pause and Learn, or PaL process, that we've introduced here at Goddard and are making available to anyone interested at the Agency to use within their projects or teams.

Part B Start time: 1:53 End time: 2:10

The PaL concept is not new; it's borrowed from many years of experience with After Action Reviews that have been done within the Army and other branches of the military. The concept is to embed learning in the project life cycle and in the teams.

Part C Start time: 3:33 End time: 3:53

This PaL process is intended to, first of all, help the team learn [from] themselves. So, the team that was involved in the activity, the group that actually did the work, that handled the review, or ran the tests, or developed the piece of equipment, they sit down and actually say, "What did we learn from this exercise? What did we learn from what we went through?"

When the PaL Process is Useful within a Project/Program

Start time: 2:18 End time: 3:32

The idea behind a PaL is to create learning events at major milestones or critical events in the life of a project, such that a project will have learned as they have executed their work and not waiting until everything is done and the launch is done and the mission is over, before a time of reflection is taken to learn from things that have happened along the way.

In this way, the project team not only has the opportunity to learn themselves from their own experiences, but is much better able to articulate the lessons that they are in the process of learning to other teams that are in parallel working on problems similar to theirs at the same time. This addresses the question of how you transfer lessons or insights gained within one project to another project without waiting until the final outcome of the whole mission. .

How the PaL Process Benefits a Project/Program

Part A Start time: 6:58 End time: 7:32

This PaL process turns out to be part therapy, part learning from each other, part articulating their own vision that they've spent so much time sharing outside the team. They actually share with each other and get to say, "Well, that's what I was trying to do, that's what we came across as, that's what happened." All the teams that have produced these PaLs or held these kinds of PaL sessions have experienced this kind of

strengthening of the team's understanding of what we're about, which means that they benefit more from the activity than they already had.

Part B Start time: 8:12 End time: 8:38

There's a lot of value for the team from the organizational side. You don't have to take a week, you don't have to take a weekend, you don't have to spend a day to go off and do a retreat and spend a lot of time playing games and getting around to where people feel comfortable to say things. A PaL is meant to be short and sweet. Right in the midst of work, you can take time to reflect and have those kinds of discussions.

Part C Start time: 5:44 End time: 6:31

The PaL process was designed with the convenience and ease of use in mind for project people and disciplined experts in our branches and engineering divisions who, of course, already have a lot of work to do. So, it's not designed as a process that encumbers them or takes a lot of time or effort. In fact, to execute a PaL, the team fundamentally just needs to meet for about an hour, hour and a half. Typically, we provide a facilitator who will come in and just take off the pressure of having to prepare any notes or any presentations and will guide the team through a discussion of what happened, why did that happen, and what did we learn from that—all things that are good for the team to discuss.

The Four Basic Principles of the PaL Process

Part A Start Time: 14:17 End Time: 15:14

When we set up the process here at Goddard to do Pause and Learn sessions, we did a lot of research with the Army that had been using After Action Reviews for over twenty years. And there were a lot of good lessons that we could borrow from what they'd learned with much experience. We tried to take the most core or fundamental of those principles and apply them to how we designed the PaL process and they've come down to just a few simple principles

First of all, the PaL is a non-attribution place where people can gather and speak freely. We don't take names and we don't typically tape record them or videotape them. Often, we ask if it works better whether their project manager or department leader or division leader is there or not. They have the option of having the meeting without their leader there if they feel like that's important. We can do it either way. So it's a safe space. That's the first thing, and that turned out to be very important. Soon as it's a report, or the cameras go on, you get a different kind of meeting.

Part B Start: 15:21 End time: 17:25

Second, it's a meeting of the participants themselves. You want the actual people who did the work in the room. So it's not a group of people talking about some work they know about. You want the technician: you want the person who was turning the screw, cutting the metal, bending the sheets coming up actually talking with you about how the test was run, or how the work was done, or how we did the design. So you want all those people in the room so they can actually explain how they were approaching their work

and why they did what they did, and you can revisit those kinds of decisions and steps and actually learn from that.

Third, it turns out to be important that the PaLs are done close to the action. So, in time and space and person, I mentioned the people, you want also to be done as soon as possible after some event or milestone has been passed. Because it's that fresh memory of what we actually experienced: there's some emotion, there's some feeling, there's some drama of what went on there and you want people to be able to feel that and express that. And so they can sense what it was we learned from going through that experience, and some of that is lost if too much time or distance happens between the events and when the PaL is actually held.

The fourth thing that we introduced was that PaLs often work better when they are facilitated by someone from outside of the group. There are two reasons for that: one, they can be more objective about keeping the conversation open and fair and in a non-attribution sort of way—not finding blame, but focusing on what happened because they don't have a stick in the fight one way or the other. The second reason a facilitator is important is because it relieves the burden from anyone in the project or team having to do any kind of work for this event. They literally show up and a facilitator who is somewhat familiar with their project can lead them through a discussion of what happened and what they learned from that, and get them to some meaningful discussion without the project team having to expend any preparation time for that activity.